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ABSTRACT

To become the primary agents of school restructuring, today's coalitions must sharpen their focus and adopt a long-term outlook. This report explains how to turn a coalition of different perspectives and interest groups into a coherent, long-term strategic operation with a shared sense of purpose. Educators are advised to begin by identifying and bringing together key people, being prepared to change, focusing on children, and producing a statement of principles. The plan can be tailored to the community if participants frame early efforts broadly, learn extensively about restructuring, assess the current state of reform, match strategies with community needs, and value different approaches and diverse beliefs. Participants can sustain commitment and momentum by setting realistic goals and expectations, communicating ideas, and deciding on an assessment plan. A sidebar advises against scapegoating, favoring one interest group, ignoring the media, and looking for quick fixes. Two interviews with leaders of the Maine Coalition for Excellence in Education and the Texas Business and Education Coalition provide further advice for building and maintaining coalitions. An action checklist and a list of other Education Commission of the States publications is included. (MLH)

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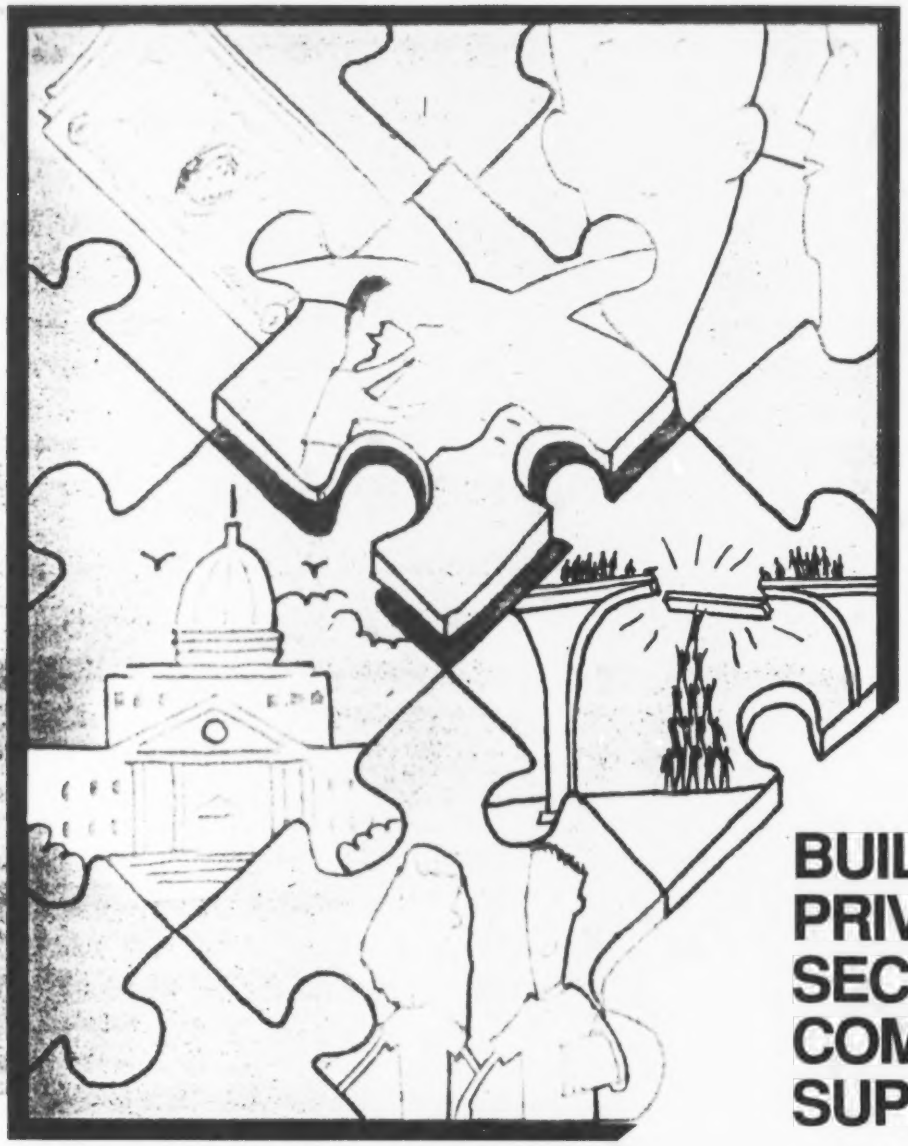

BUILDING PRIVATE SECTOR AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Restructuring the Education System

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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DEAR FRIENDS:

Over the past year, ECS has refined its work on policies and strategies needed to fundamentally change our education system. This pamphlet is part of an ECS series outlining how states can design and carry out a comprehensive, coherent plan to restructure the system in order to educate every student to a much higher level than ever before.

Vigorous public dialogue is the key to beginning the type of systemic change needed in our education system. Such a conversation can spark fresh ideas, connect issues to citizen concerns, create new visions of what is possible, cause us to rethink values behind current policies, give citizens faith in the process of policy making and focus their attention on what's good for the community as a whole. A broad-based, public/private coalition can be the catalyst for carrying out these conversations and for formulating and implementing a comprehensive plan to make our education system worthy of our children.

This brochure looks at the roles and responsibilities of such coalitions. Perhaps most important, it shows how today's efforts to restructure the education system require a much different, much broader involvement of citizens than the coalitions of the past decade.

In my own state of Maine, our coalition is building on a broad consensus that our schools need to improve, a view growing since Maine undertook its first reforms in 1984. People are now talking about outcomes — what students should know and be able to do.

I encourage every state and community that has not yet done so to begin this conversation. And I encourage you to see the other publications in this series for additional information on how to move toward an education system for the 21st century.

Sincerely,

John R. McKernan Jr.
Governor of Maine
1991-92 ECS chairman

In the Beginning

While efforts to restructure the education system to improve achievement for all students can be initiated at the school, district or state level, long-term success depends on support from a variety of people who rally around common goals.

In the past, efforts to involve the community more in the life of a school have centered around such activities as fundraising or asking people to file in the school office, work on the playground, drive on field trips or read to students. Businesses often "adopted" schools, typically by providing resources for programs or equipment that the normal school budget did not allow.

Even coalitions involving parents, businesspeople, educators and other community members have tended to address the immediate needs of individual schools and districts while overlooking long-term improvement. Although such short-term improvements benefited students, teachers and others, they left the basic education system structure intact.

Today's efforts to restructure the education system require a much broader involvement of citizens. Today's schools are adequately educating only **some** of the students, although experts say the 21st century will require **all** students to have higher levels of knowledge and skills. Isolated reform in schools and districts alone will not be enough to meet this goal.

The education system itself has to change from the state level, where most policies governing education are made, to the individual school, which must change its traditional ways of teaching and learning, to the college, which must change its expectations for prospective teachers and for its students. A broad-based public/private coalition will ensure that reform takes place at all levels of the education system and that each step is part of a well-thought-out, comprehensive plan rather than isolated reform.

The New Generation

Today's coalitions must sharpen their focus and adopt a longer-term outlook than coalitions of the past. Coalitions must evolve into the primary agents of education restructuring. They are especially useful for maintaining continuity of reform. Schools and districts trying to make changes report they are hampered by turnover of key leaders. Because true restructuring will take up to 10 years, coalitions can serve as the force to keep restructuring moving ahead during times of transition or turnover in leadership.

So how does one turn a coalition of different perspectives and interest groups into a coherent, long-term strategic organization with a shared sense of purpose?

How to Get Started

Like education itself, coalition-building is a learning process. And while there are no hard and fast rules for building effective coalitions, there are a few strategies that can help a coalition maintain a long-term focus and avoid being sidetracked or dominated by one issue or perspective.

- **Identify and bring together key people**. A coalition needs to be as diverse as possible. Bring in interested people who represent a wide range of perspectives — business, parents, teachers, higher education, community leaders and others.
- **Be prepared to change.** Broaden your circle as the coalition matures. The people and structure you start with may change. Over time, you may need to change how your coalition is set up and who participates. Just as schools are being asked to examine their most fundamental assumptions — and their way of doing business — people who participate in coalitions need periodically to reexamine the coalition's mission and strategies.
- **Focus on children.** Frame your questions and considerations in terms of people's hopes for their children, not in terms of their gripes about the education system. At this early stage, your coalition has to build a sense of shared purpose. You may want to bring in an outside facilitator during early discussions to provide context and a third-party perspective.
- **Produce a statement of principles.** With early conversations as a basis, create a mission statement to guide your actions. The statement should express the coalition's broad convictions and aspirations. Avoid the temptation to talk about specific problems or goals. Later on, if reform efforts bog down, these principles can be used to get the coalition back on track. People find it easier to know *what* to do when they remind themselves *why* they are doing it.

How To Tailor the Plan to Your Community

- **Frame your early efforts broadly.** Begin discussions with a broad look at your particular schools and students and save dealing with specifics such as classrooms and curriculum for later.
- **Learn as much as you can about restructuring.** Before outlining steps to move reform forward, encourage coalition members to read and learn as much as possible about issues, theories, practice and policy. Talk to others who have been through the experience of building a coalition to help restructure schools.
- **Assess the current state of reform.** In many states and communities, reform efforts are under way. In others, talk has not yet evolved into action. In either case, your group must assess the current state of local efforts and take that into account when making decisions about how to proceed. Don't reinvent the wheel.
- **Match strategies with community needs.** Whether the coalition represents a state or local community, adopted strategies need to align with specific needs of the community. For example, a local coalition may be concerned about the needs of its large immigrant population. A state coalition should balance the need for schools to be accountable to their communities with the desire for the state to have statewide testing data.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

- **Looking for scapegoats**. It is too easy to cite failure or blame schools, staffs, bureaucracies, even students, for today's education problems. The coalition must create a climate in which people are working "with" the schools, not doing something "to" them.
- **Letting one interest group prevail.** Any need creates a vacuum, and emotions run so strong concerning the schools that it is easy for one viewpoint, interest group or perspective to dominate the coalition's work. In both representation and day-to-day operations, avoid allowing any one interest to gain disproportionate influence.
- **Ignoring the media**. Make the media part of your solutions by involving them from the start. Hold news conferences at key stages in your process, establish editorial board meetings to involve opinion leaders in your efforts, answer media questions promptly and accurately.
- **Looking for the quick fix.** Recognize that restructuring the education system is a long-term effort; quick-fix approaches simply don't work.

- **Recognize there is no one formula for success.** Each state or local community is different and what works for one may not work for another. One state's coalition may have an entirely different focus, structure or make-up than its neighbor. State coalitions, however, can learn from observing the experiences of others, such as the two described in this brochure.
- **Value diversity of beliefs.** It is highly unlikely that any coalition will reach complete consensus in conversations about what students should know and be able to do. Recognizing that not everyone will agree with what the majority favors, coalitions should take steps to provide options, such as alternative schools or programs, to satisfy the diverse beliefs of people in the community.

How to Sustain Commitment and Momentum

- **Set realistic goals and expectations.** Grounded by a vision statement, girded by as much information as your group can gather and an understanding of reform efforts under way, you are ready to begin identifying goals. At this stage, focus on desired outcomes and results, not budgets, logistics or what must go into the process. Think: What should all students know and be able to do? As a starting point, examine the goals adopted by a state whose reforms impress you or look at the national goals adopted by the governors.
- **Communicate your ideas.** By this stage, the coalition is committed to a product — a new education system — which means you have to do some substantive salesmanship to get support from all persons who will be involved. Develop a communications plan to publicize and encourage discussion about the goals. Include everyone who will be affected — the state board and state department of education, legislature, mayor's and governor's offices, PTAs and other parent groups, teachers' unions, students, chambers of commerce, businesses and others. Remember, teachers and students speak different languages, as do businesspeople, administrators, politicians and educators, so use plain, clear English, free of jargon.
- **Decide on an assessment plan**. Assessing how well the coalition is performing its stated mission is one of the more complex issues the coalition will face. Avoid the temptation to move to take action or to report results too soon in the process: some goals will lend themselves to quantitative assessment; others will be considerably less tangible and may take years to reach.

MAINE COALITION FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

James Orr, Chairman

Interview with **Meredith Jones,** director of program development for the Maine Development Foundation (MDF), a quasi-public organization devoted to improving education and Maine's business climate. The foundation coordinates the coalition.

Q. What were the most important steps in building the coalition?

- **Build an inclusive group.**

  The Maine Coalition for Excellence in Education (MCEE) includes representatives of groups involved in education reform, as well as key leaders in education: legislative leaders from both parties; representatives from state, private and technical colleges; businesspeople (including the head of Maine's largest corporation); and presidents of school boards, teachers' associations, the PTA and other education associations.

  The down side is that we have 38 people sitting around a hollow block trying to discuss things. But that's the price of inclusivity.
- **Mesh a variety of interests into common goals.**

  Because the coalition brings government and business together with the education community to address both the problems and the solutions in education, we opened the door for issues that Maine needs to be concerned about.
- **Establish and maintain communication**.

  The coalition was formed after a number of informal conversations between state and education leaders showed that wider support was necessary. Maine Development Foundation leaders then met quietly with several different groups and the commissioner of education to ask whether there was a role for the coalition to play in moving education reform forward.

The coalition continually works to defuse opposition that may arise when people lack information. Some people are nervous because they imagine things are going on that they don't know about. We're trying to satisfy that insatiable curiosity by having regular briefings with the heads of education associations, so their constituents get it almost from "the horse's mouth."

Q. Have there been galvanizing experiences for the coalition?

We're beginning to see a statewide shift in the landscape about the issue. When MCEE hosted a conference in 1990 about education reform, few people outside the education community were talking about the need for fundamental change in the education system. Now, government, business and education are working together to accomplish reform. Two years ago we were talking about add-on projects, but now that has changed. There is no longer a project mentality, but a fundamental change mentality.

Q. What tips do you have to help other coalitions move ahead?

- **Identify key leaders and make sure they are on board.**

  Key people can move an issue forward by virtue of their position and other influence. The more quickly you get them on board, the faster the coalition will be able to progress.

- **Ensure that you have the support of the business community.**

  Having the strong support of the business community is something I cannot overestimate. This is something the education community cannot do alone — it must be with the business community.

- **Recognize that the reform process is long and complex.**

  Once a partnership is built, businesspeople can be frustrated by the time reform takes. On the other hand, the education community does a good job of thinking and reflecting, but is less quick to change. Change is not as difficult as the education community makes it out to be, and not as simple as the business community makes it out to be. Understanding that is the key to coalition building.

Q. What obstacles have you overcome?

- **Tension within the coalition** because of the lack of a common value system and language. We've got 38 interesting people around a table and they all speak a different language. The coalition counters this with communication, encouraging as much learning, questioning and debate as possible.

- **Conflicting/competing interests**

  Supporting the goals of the coalition sometimes brings members into conflict with their own interests. Coalition members try hard to be polite with one another, but that hampers their ability to deal with the issues, because the issues force them to be in conflict. To ease this tension, coalition staff encourage open communication and an atmosphere of trust.

Q. How do you evaluate your coalition's success?

In time, success will be measured not only by commitment but also by how far the issue of reform has moved in Maine.

Q. How are you moving forward on your vision?

MDF brings many things under its umbrella that affect education. For instance, it serves as the steering committee for Maine's Re:Learning and national education goals efforts. There's not much appetite for competing things in the marketplace. In the public's mind, education is one thing, not several projects. Sell them one thing and they're much quicker to listen to you.

Q. What are the advantages of working in a smaller state?

- Maine, like many smaller states, is typically rural, without large metro areas. There is an economy of scale in doing something on a statewide basis.

- The down side is that, like most states, we resist change. Doing this kind of work is risky, because you're dealing with kids' lives — what if we make a mistake?

- What's neat about it is that word spreads fast. We can really make progress because communities are tiny, so we can get them on board and work with them.

For more information, contact the coalition at 45 Memorial Circle, Augusta, ME 04330; 207-622-6345.

TEXAS BUSINESS AND EDUCATION COALITION

John Stevens, Executive Director

Interview with **C. J. Sherrill**, coalition administrator

Q. What were the most important steps in building the coalition?

- **Start with organized, well-thought-out planning.**

  The Texas Business and Education Coalition (TBEC) took its own advice: 'Don't begin without a long-range plan because this project is not to be completed by Thursday.' Like its local member coalitions, TBEC looks a long way down the road.

- **Maintain communication.**

  TBEC publishes a comprehensive statement of purpose as well as a community action handbook, both of which serve as powerful tools for communicating the coalition's goals and actions. In addition, there are 10 regional representatives ready to respond to the needs of local coalitions.

- **Build consensus, both internally and externally.**

  Among its members, and when they reach out into the community, TBEC works to have as much agreement as possible. This is usually not an arduous process. Everyone recognizes that the goals are valid.

Q. Have there been galvanizing experiences for the coalition?

TBEC used the Texas Scholars program as a demonstration of what can be done in education reform. Pioneered in Longview, Texas, as GLOBE, the program dropped remedial courses and encouraged students to take standard-level courses. This resulted in measurable increases: 67% more students registered for physics; 36% more seniors took higher mathematics courses; two chemistry teachers were added; and all five school districts involved added math and science teachers. TBEC found that success easily translates to a larger scale.

Q. What tips do you have to help other coalitions move ahead?

- **Recognize that each community is different and needs to set its own agenda.**

- **Spread the word that you are there and ready to help.**

  TBEC helps communities assess their strengths and weaknesses. It seems like such an overwhelming task, and just having the presence of someone who has been through it is encouraging. It signals that there have been successes in other locations.

- **Recognize that consensus is optimal, but not always possible.**

  In some instances, it takes time to generate consensus, and you may never achieve it totally. Don't let the negative people generate the dominant atmosphere. Go on with your business, and let the results convince doubters.

Q. What obstacles have you overcome?

Time and time again, TBEC encounters people who are tired of being compared with Pacific rim and European countries and don't see the long-term benefit for their own community from improving education. This opposition is overcome by providing people with figures such as test scores and dropout rates, as well as the voice of the business community asking for graduates who can read and do high-school-level math. Gradually, the success of the coalition's work convinces them there is room for improvement.

Q. How do you evaluate your coalition's success?

After two years in existence, TBEC has 76 coalitions that have either formed under the TBEC umbrella or elected to align themselves with our work, with more organizing each week. On

the local level, each coalition sets it own goals; success is judged by whether or not those local goals are met.

Q. How are you moving forward on your vision?

Because TBEC's vision is one of local communities setting their own goals and achieving their own reforms, the coalition's main task is an enabling/ empowering one. People will call the office feeling overwhelmed at the scope of the task ahead. But our talking about their problem sometimes opens a door for them, so they can find a way to handle it locally. Often it takes more than that, but it helps simplify the task to verbalize the problem. This is such a huge area: where do you begin to diagnose what changes are needed and where to go next? We recommend that they set both short- and long-term goals. We tell people not to be afraid to bring up problems, even if no one else has mentioned them before. We help by sitting down and brainstorming.

Q. How do you build consensus among the coalition's different members?

If we waited for 100% agreement before moving ahead, we'd still be sitting there with our limestone rocks and slates drawing pictures. Sometimes people need demonstrations of reforms that work. TBEC emphasizes results and works with local coalitions to help them set reasonable goals and find creative solutions that don't require a large capital expenditure.

For more information, contact TBEC at 900 Congress Avenue, Suite 501, Austin, Texas 78701-2447; 512-472-1594.

CHECKLIST FOR ACTION

- Don't go it alone.
- Identify groups with an interest in education.
- Identify opinion leaders.
- Determine each coalition member's role.
- Build on the success of others.
- Learn as much as possible about the current state of education.
- Develop a vision of what students should know and be able to do.
- Establish measurable goals and objectives for the coalition.
- Develop a plan to pursue your objectives in a realistic timeframe.
- Be prepared for a long-term project.
- Document and share your results.

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The Restructuring the Education System *series is part of the ECS Systems Change initiative. ECS wishes to thank the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the UNUM Life Insurance Company for their support of these publications.*

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The Education Commission of the States (ECS) is a nonprofit, nationwide interstate compact formed in 1965. The primary purpose of the commission is to help governors, state legislators, state education officials and others develop policies to improve the quality of education at all levels.

Forty-nine states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are members. The ECS offices are at 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, Colorado 80202-3427.

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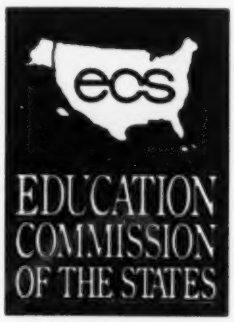

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This publication is part of an ECS series titled *Restructuring the Education System* (SI-92-1P). Publications in the series include:

- *Introduction to Systemic Education Reform* — Examines the rationale for and components of a systemic approach to education reform (SI-92-1) $3
- *Building Private Sector and Community Support* — Defines the role of public/private coalitions needed to lead the call for a new education system (SI-92-2) $4
- *Creating Visions and Standards To Support Them* — Examines the importance of having a vision for a new education system and presents suggestions on how to use the vision/standard-setting process to move reform forward (SI-92-3) $4
- *Bringing Coherence to State Policy* — Describes problems with traditional education reform policy and presents a guide to creating policy that supports widespread education reform (SI-92-4) $4

The four publications listed above are available as a packet for $12. Individual publications may be ordered for the amounts listed in the descriptions of each.

Other ECS publications about restructuring the education system include:

- *A Consumer's Guide, Volume 1* — Answers common questions about education system restructuring and provides brief overviews of 10 major initiatives (SI-91-4) $8
- *Communication* — Provides tips on building support for education system restructuring through effective communication strategies and skills (SI-91-5) $4
- *Communicating About Restructuring* — Kit. Contains how-to's and examples of successful communication tools and strategies (SI-91-6) $20
- *School Restructuring: What the Reformers Are Saying* — Summarizes a lengthy discussion among nationally recognized education reformers (SI-91-8) $5

To order any of the above publications, contact the ECS Distribution Center, 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427; 303-299-3692. Purchase orders and checks only; no credit card orders.

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Maine Governor John R. McKernan, Jr., 1991-92 ECS chairman, is a leading advocate for education reform in Maine and New England. As Maine's first Republican governor in two decades, his tenure has been marked by new initiatives designed to expand opportunities for non-college-bound youth, increase accountability and strengthen curriculum. His leadership won recognition for Maine in 1989 as National Alliance of Business "State of the Year" for human resource initiatives.

A Bangor native who graduated from Dartmouth College and the University of Maine School of Law, McKernan also chairs the National Governors' Association Committee on Human Resources and the Jobs for America's Graduates program. Previously, he served two terms as Maine's representative in the U.S. Congress, where he served on the House Education and Labor Committee.